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OMALINK owner Chris Stokes stands next to one of the vans that serve his passenger and courier service from Lincoln to Omaha and Eppley Airfield.

Lincoln-Eppley shuttle takes off

With only a month in the business, OMALiNK owner says the passenger and courier business is increasing

BY RODD CAYTON
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Chris Stokes and Shawn Msrny thought a commuter shuttle service between Lincoln and Omaha's Eppley Airfield was a good idea.

After a month of running their shuttle service, OMALiNK, the pair remain convinced.

OMALiNK vans leave Lincoln every odd hour from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. While the service stops at The Cornhusker, Embassy Suites and Holiday Inn, passengers can arrange for pick-up anywhere in the downtown area.

While the route is mapped out as a straight shot to Eppley, the vans will drop passengers at any exit along Interstate 80 or anywhere in downtown Omaha, Stokes said.

In about a month of operation, Stokes said, OMALiNK is carrying an average of 15 passengers a day and continues to see use increase.

Law, architecture and accounting firms also use the service, for example, to send documents to Omaha. Stokes said the courier traffic has been a pleasant surprise.

OMALiNK's courier arm is intended as a competitor to package-delivery companies' next-day service, he said.

With OMALiNK, packages arrive at their destinations the same day.

Stokes said he got the idea for the shuttle service from observations as a business traveler that there was no alternative for Eppley-bound travelers to either driving to Omaha and paying long-term parking rates or taking a taxicab.

Stokes is taking a leave of absence from his job as a United Airlines pilot to get the business going.

The commuter service is useful to passengers from other areas visiting Lincoln, Stokes said — particularly when the visitors arrive at or leave Eppley in midday or late at night.

Kent Markel of Phoenix, in Lincoln for the holidays, went home Tuesday. He said he thought OMALiNK was a better choice than having relatives drive him back to Eppley in time for a 2:30 p.m. departure.

Out-of-towners and business travelers who find themselves arriving at Eppley late are likely to be relieved at the news of an 11 p.m. OMALiNK departure to Lincoln.

Stokes said CEOs also would be wise to consider the shuttle service when sending employees out of town via Eppley. He said one firm that books

frequent business trips now pays about \$18,000 a month for parking and mileage reimbursements and would pay about half that by switching to OMALiNK.

Stokes said cost comparison is a prime selling point. He said some passengers dismiss the service upon hearing the fees: \$17.50 to \$39.95, depending on reservations and companions.

Stokes said there are no immediate plans to expand the service, although the company may at some point link Southeast Nebraska travelers with Kansas City International Airport.

Lincoln Airport Authority executive director John Wood doesn't expect OMALiNK to erode numbers of passengers flying from Lincoln Municipal Airport.

"The people flying out of Omaha are going to fly out of Omaha anyway," he said.

Wood said Lincoln Municipal is still more convenient than Eppley.

"It's still an hour and 15 minute drive, if you're driving it or someone else," he said.

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OMALiNK

Schedule: Leaves Nebraska Union, 14th and R streets, every two hours from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week. Also stops at The Cornhusker, Embassy Suites and Holiday Inn Downtown. Returns from Eppley Airfield every two hours from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Rates: One-way with reservation, \$34.95; one-way without reservation, \$39.95; round-trip with reservation, \$49.95. Companions travel for \$14.95 one way or \$19.95 round trip with a full-fare passenger.

Reservations: Available online at www.omalink.com, by calling (402) 475-5465 or at 1311 M St. Passengers may board at any pickup point without reservations.